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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CE

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SUBJECT: GREENS KINGMAKERS IN SAARLAND ELECTION

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¶1. (C) Summary: Saarland voters gave incumbent Minister-President and Christian Democrat Peter Mueller a political lashing in the August 30 state parliamentary elections, and showed their continued affection for former Social Democratic Party (SPD) chief and current Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine. National CDU leaders may now have to re-calculate their campaign messages and focus for the four remaining weeks before national parliamentary elections. A new look at the Greens may be in order. The Saarland results have made the Greens, which Sunday afternoon still were nervous about remaining in parliament, the kingmakers in building the next Saarland government. Both Mueller and current SPD leader Heiko Maas were already wooing the Greens Sunday night, with Mueller seeking a CDU-Free Democratic Party-Green coalition and Maas an SPD-Left-Green government. Negotiations will almost certainly extend past the 27 September Bundestag vote.

¶2. (C) The results of the Saarland elections point to the bizarre nature of German politics at the moment. The CDU lost the elections but the SPD didn't really win. The Left Party made substantial gains but does not know how to manage its newly found power. The Greens may be the kingmaker but they may seek to stall a decision on their future membership of a SPD-Left Party coalition until after the parliamentary election, which will result in a longer period of political uncertainty in a state to which many political analysts will be looking in coming weeks. End Summary.

¶3. (SBU) The CDU and SPD both suffered losses on Sunday, when strong voter turnout appears to have benefitted Lafontaine's Left Party the most. The CDU lost 13 points from 2004 but remained the largest party with 34.5 percent of the vote and 19 seats in parliament. The SPD fell 6.3 percent to win 24.5 percent and 13 seats. The Left had a strong third-place showing with 21.3 percent and 11 seats. The two smaller parties both increased their share of the vote, the FDP from 5.2 to 9.2 percent (five seats) and the Greens from 5.6 to 5.9 percent (three seats). Turnout was 67.6 percent, up from 55.5 percent in 2004.

¶4. (SBU) CDU Minister-President Mueller conceded publicly election night that he had not expected such large losses, calling them "painful," but insisted that as the largest party the CDU has the right to head the next government. He added he would talk to all the parties except the Left Party but was seeking a "Jamaica" CDU-FDP-Green coalition (which represent the parties with the colors black/green/yellow). He rejected any suggestion that he might have to step down as minister-president to form such a government. The Social Democrats celebrated the Sunday results despite their own losses, their worst since Saarland became part of the Federal Republic. SPD leader and minister-president candidate Maas told U.S. Consulate officials that if it was up to him, negotiations could quickly produce a red-red-green (SPD-Left-Greens) government. He stressed publicly that the CDU's campaign against a red-red government had failed and that the left-leaning parties won a clear majority. Lafontaine clearly relished the Left Party's unexpectedly strong showing and also called for a red-red-green alliance.

¶5. (SBU) The Greens looked just as happy as the Left Party in post

election interviews and are likely to make full use of their position as kingmaker in a future coalition. Greens Caucus chief Hubert Ulrich joked that "we are very popular tonight" and rejected repeated attempts by the press to suggest a preferred coalition. He said it was up to the other parties to come to them with a coalition proposal but that the Greens would take their time and base their decision on policy substance. The Greens want to reverse Mueller's introduction of university tuition payments and are seeking much stronger support for public transportation than has occurred under Mueller, but they are closer to the CDU and FDP in supporting the phasing out of coal mining.

16. (SBU) At the same time, Ulrich called Lafontaine's campaign to keep the Greens out of the parliament "not nice" but said the Greens were "professionals" who would not let personalities get in the way of agreement. Lafontaine, in a gesture to the Greens, repeated his intention to stay out of any government he would not head. Overall, the Greens are torn between the intensity of their dislike for Mueller versus the Left Party, now that their campaign goal of an SPD-FDP-Greens alliance failed to gain a parliamentary majority. Ulrich noted that any decision would have to be approved by the party rank-and-file and that negotiations with either side would be very difficult.

17. (C) Comment: Although the final results of Sunday's vote remain wide open, they already show the continued decline of the so-called major parties and the need to consider new coalition alternatives that can give a well placed party influence beyond its size. Both the CDU and SPD will work hard to woo the Greens, and the FDP and the Left Party have reasons to be flexible as well. The only road to power for the Left Party is via an SPD-Left-Green coalition, and the FDP will have to make concessions to the smaller Green party if it wants to achieve its first ever participation in the Saarland government. Either coalition would set a precedent for Saarland and for Germany.

18. (C) The election results also reflect the need -- and apparent willingness of party leaders at least in Saarland, where all of the parties are to the left of their national leadership -- to adjust to this changed political landscape. The Greens may find themselves in the enviable position of determining Saarland's political future but their future decision over which parties to support in Saarland's coalition negotiations will undoubtedly have national implications. The Greens' Co-Party Chairman Cem Oezdemir quickly noted that "the SPD is closer to us than the CDU." This means that the SPD, Left Party, and Greens stand a reasonable chance of forming the next government while at the same time fulfilling two key objectives of the Left Party: (1) CDU Party Chairman Peter Mueller's political demise, and (2) the creation of the second SPD-Left Party coalition in a German state after Berlin. If Thuringia charts a similar course, followed possibly by Brandenburg (September 27) and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (2010), then a total of five states would be represented by SPD and Left Party state governments, prompting speculation that this particular political constellation could serve as a successful model for the 2013 parliamentary elections. End comment.

19. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
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